



Introduction: Dickensian Views

Marie-Amélie Coste, Christine Huguet, Nathalie Vanfasse

► To cite this version:

Marie-Amélie Coste, Christine Huguet, Nathalie Vanfasse. Introduction: Dickensian Views. E-rea - Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone, 2016, Dickensian Prospects, 13. hal-01422042

HAL Id: hal-01422042

<https://hal.science/hal-01422042>

Submitted on 16 Jan 2017

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



E-rea

Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone

13.2 | 2016

1. Dickensian Prospects / 2. Artistic and Literary Commitments

Introduction: Dickensian Views

Marie-Amélie COSTE, Christine HUGUET and Nathalie VANFASSE



Electronic version

URL: <http://erea.revues.org/5192>

ISBN: ISSN 1638-1718

ISSN: 1638-1718

Publisher

Laboratoire d'Études et de Recherche sur
le Monde Anglophone

Brought to you by Aix Marseille Université



Electronic reference

Marie-Amélie COSTE, Christine HUGUET and Nathalie VANFASSE, « Introduction: Dickensian Views », *E-rea* [Online], 13.2 | 2016, Online since 07 June 2016, connection on 20 January 2017. URL : <http://erea.revues.org/5192>

This text was automatically generated on 20 January 2017.



E-rea est mis à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

Introduction: Dickensian Views

Marie-Amélie COSTE, Christine HUGUET and Nathalie VANFASSE

- 1 This collection of essays entitled *Dickensian Prospects* aims to put Dickens's work into perspective by using specific strategies inspired from the field of vision. The idea is to offer unusual insights into Dickens's writing by showing how he himself at times skilfully changed his focus, adopted unusual vantage points and used frames that transformed the appearance of viewed objects. These alternative ways of looking allow the essays to explore new horizons in Dickens's aesthetics. Some highlight his meticulous care for detail and the way he looked closely into things, while others examine the contrasting effects of the bird's-eye views he also adopted. Other essays still pinpoint false perspectives and relevant blind spots in his work. Dickens himself played with clever optical effects to intrigue and occasionally mislead his readers. He also resorted to mental pictures that offered stimulating possibilities of approaching and considering his work. All in all, these essays informed by visual metaphors provide fresh insights into Dickens's world.
- 2 Mirroring as it does the fruitful working relationship between scholars from across Denmark, France, Italy, the UK and further afield, notably the US, the present volume reflects upon the latest developments in Dickens scholarship. The ten contributions gathered here provide intriguing reconsiderations not only on the fiction and personal writings of Dickens, but also on Dickens's own prospects on the world. For reasons of clarity three divisions have been adopted – Sight, Insight and Sightlessness in Dickens, Reframing Dickens, Widening Prospects – but these groupings should not, hopefully, prevent readers from discerning both the manifold perspectives and close interrelatedness of the contributions.
- 3 The three essays that make up the first section, "Sight, Insight and Sightlessness in Dickens", offer new insights into Dickensian modes of approach and control of the seen / the unseen, with special reference to the dialectic interplay of sight / sightlessness and vision in Dickens's fictional constructs. John Edmondson focuses on how Dickens's use of bird's-eye views and panoramas enables him to intuit novel and more intense modes of being. Indeed, the alternative re-imagining of the city which the remote cityscape or

urban skyline make possible, testifies to a heightened awareness of the self – a self profoundly troubled by ambivalent discoveries about the surrounding reality but also aggrandized by the sense of confusion and chaos that results from such recognition. As Edmondson convincingly argues, the remotely perceived urban reality both grants the subject the illusion of control and freedom *and* exposes him to a nightmarish and confusing shock. Thus, in *Barnaby Rudge*, Dickens places Gabriel Varden, who is returning to London after a visit to the Maypole, in an interesting state of in-betweenness: torn between the holistic experience of distant contemplation and the fragmented experience provided by direct engagement with the living reality of the city, the character strives to learn from the clash and adapt to this new awareness of the conflictual and the fugitive. Engagement with the city first from a distance, then at close quarters – or the other way round – induces a bewildering sense of belonging and not-belonging which Dickens transforms into an original index of personality. Edmondson takes the example of a journey which is the opposite of that of Gabriel Varden and well shows how, in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Nell and her Grandfather successfully end up imposing their alternative reality of the remote cityscape by gradually distancing themselves from the city.

- 4 Like several authors in this volume, Edmondson is anxious to engage, in the last analysis, with Dickens's approach to, and control of, modernity. The two essays completing the section on sight, insight and sightlessness chime in with Edmondson's in seeking to identify moments of experimental vision in Dickens's fiction, when normal perceptions of reality break down or get obstructed, literally or figuratively. While Jeremy Tambling focuses on the difficulty of ever reaching, through aesthetic means, what there is to be seen, Francesca Orestano studies the literal accidentals of vision by addressing the theme of blindness in Dickens's *American Notes* (1842) and *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845). Thus, Jeremy Tambling's article starts with examples of what obstructs the characters' view, makes their repressed desires visible and blocks their prospect, meaning their future. Tambling casts light on views from Dickens by comparing them with Cézanne's art and Merleau-Ponty's and Lacan's analyses of it. Cézanne's painting, as Dickens's writing, starts with a Copernican revolution of sorts, decentering the viewer, removing his sense of mastery and all his certainties. Looking at the world is a reflexive act, which involves being looked at in return; it shows the difficulty of ever reaching what there is to be seen, the non-empirically visible, and which is nevertheless what attracts the attempt to describe. But if the viewer is no longer the master-mind, vision is nonetheless a strange possession and Tambling connects Dickens with Cézanne through their mutual fascination with delirious intensity and *trompe l'oeil*, the unfamiliarity of the familiar.
- 5 Orestano explores the idea that – unsurprisingly after all, given Dickens's unabashed handling of poetic justice and compensatory plot ingredients in some of his texts of the 1840s – sight impairment and its resulting lack of prospects endow the blind character with the capacity to grasp the essence of truth and reach epiphanic vision. Orestano broadens the scope of her study by demonstrating how the eminently Dickensian landscape / inscape dialectic is similarly acknowledged by such varied authors as Wilkie Collins (in *Poor Miss Finch*, 1872), André Gide (in *La symphonie pastorale*, 1919) and Charlie Chaplin (in *City Lights*, 1932) – in the process demonstrating how Dickens's uncommon sense of the spectacular and the dramatic anticipates cinematic creativity. Orestano's focus is on Dickens's multidimensional use of the paradox of the blind person's body – metaphorically represented as at once a tomb-like reality and an open book – a prime example being provided by Bertha in *The Cricket on the Hearth*. As Orestano argues, the

character's physical blindness is what accounts, melodramatically enough, for her sensitiveness and acuteness of perception. A strong point in Orestano's study of Dickens's treatment of physical blindness is that it includes a number of insightful micro-analyses of Dickens's superb rhetoric of blindness / insight and the fascinating handling of synecdoche it entails. Synecdoche in *Cricket* is indeed what makes possible the alignment of human households to a set of fabricated dolls' houses, inhabited by stiff and ominous inmates.

- 6 Maria Teresa Chialant's essay – the first one in the volume's second section, devoted to a “reframing” and reassessing of the Dickens corpus – similarly moves from a careful examination of thematic choices to a riveting dissection of stylistic strategies. Besides offering an exploration of the place granted to the shop in Dickens's fiction and how, in *Dombey and Son*, it is utilized as the ideal container of heterogeneous things, piled up in disparate fashion by association, analogy or contrast, Chialant's essay focuses on the homology between the shop and the page. Chialant builds on recent studies of material culture and representational techniques of objects (notably by Flint, Freedgood, Furneaux, Penny and Waters), not only to explore their moral meaning and offer fresh perspectives on Dickens's oblique representation of social inequalities, but also to foreground intriguing literary effects which readers have long learnt to recognize as a Dickens hallmark. In particular, Chialant's reconsideration of Dickens's indefatigable, quasi pathological urge to name and enumerate things goes beyond an examination of Dickensian realistic discourse and veridictory effects. In interrogating semantic / phonic correlations from a “thingly” perspective, Chialant offers interesting comments on forms of rhetorical plenitude in *Dombey and Son*.
- 7 If the initial focus of *Dickensian Prospects* was on sight, John O. Jordan's thoroughly documented essay suggests that hearing is no less central to a better appreciation of Dickens's alertness to the world around him. His essay is also an apt complement to Chialant's, insofar as it seeks to revisit previous assessments of characteristic Dickens traits – plot ingredients and writing practices, in the present case. After correctly recording Dickens's genuine interest in the rather eccentric theory of sound advanced by his friend, the mathematician Charles Babbage, Jordan comes to insightful conclusions about the novelist's aesthetics in the 1840s. He engages in a fascinating taxonomy of sonic elements (including human speech and voice, more often than not startlingly dissociated from the body) in *The Old Curiosity Shop* – a particularly “noisy” novel, arguably. In the process, Jordan echoes most of the contributors' observations about both the broad range of Dickens's imagination – here, his auditory imagination – and his subtle, varied use of strategies of obliquity such as metonymy. Thus, Jordan suggests, Master Humphrey's mansion can be construed as a kind of preternatural sound storage space as well as a bewildering replication of the structure of human hearing. Jordan's study of soundscape in *The Old Curiosity Shop* leads him to the fascinating conclusion that narrative omniscience should be seen as a form not only of visual power but also of hearing power.
- 8 Céline Prest's exploration of “paperscape” rounds up the second section with more considerations on how Charles Babbage's *Ninth Bridgewater Treatise* influenced Dickens in a lasting way. Dickens's awareness of the disparate, heterogeneous accumulation of messages in newspapers and on city walls also gives him access, Prest argues, to a perception of new, original media of preservation and transmission of his writing – air, notably, becoming a most reliable vehicle. Like Chialant, Prest reassesses Dickens's writing strategies by remarking on the recurrence, in his fictional constructs, of

montages and collages of texts, endlessly rewritten and reappropriated by successive addressees. Chialant's observation of the homology between the shop and the page is paralleled here by considerations on how the pages of the novel become city walls, allowing new structures of writing to emerge. Prest's and Chialant's essays further coalesce around the notion of threat of annihilation, or at best dilution, of meaning – as when the things in Krook's rag and bottle window, in the introductory pages of *Bleak House*, cease to have any intrinsic meaning because they are bought, not sold. Another threat looms over the Dickensian paperscape, according to Prest: the threat of illegibility. Whereas Orestano focuses on blindness and Jordan on silence, Prest's interest is in the counterproductive overabundance of words and paper, permanently liable to acquire the solidity and opacity of the city walls they have covered and muffled up.

- 9 Uniformity is no Dickens characteristic, and Prest, along with Chialant and others, pinpoints interesting textual ambivalences towards the written sign, in its overwhelmingly diverse materiality – paper's potential destructiveness does not prevent it from being the organizing principle of the narrative and the cityscape too. Thus, as this essay convincingly demonstrates, in identifying the complex links between the city, a perfect landscape of words, and his own pages, it is fragmented modernity itself that Dickens so powerfully interrogates, perhaps nowhere more strikingly than in the surreal, grotesque and kafkaesque 1855 essay entitled "Out of Town", in which a clever *mise en abyme* of a city – a city wrapped in newspapers – is born out of the narrator's wild imagination.
- 10 The final section of the volume addresses the issue of ever broadening prospects and perspectives in Dickens, in a bid to account for his perennial and increasingly globalized status – and philosophy of life, possibly. While Dominic Rainsford seeks to explore the global impact of Dickens by lifting up his eyes, along with the novelist, to the skies and highlighting the symbolic function and significance of the extra-terrestrial – astronomical and cosmic elements – in his fiction, Gillian Piggott sends Dickens back to earth and into today's Tripoli, in an original attempt to portray him as a time-traveller as well as a global writer, and Juliet John closes the section with an innovative set of considerations on the cultural and ecological legacy in Dickens's quaint, enticing *Pictures from Italy*.
- 11 Rainsford spans the whole corpus, beginning with Dickens's least known early works, notably his farce, *The Lamplighter*, written in 1838 for William Macready, for performance at Covent Garden. Like John Edmondson, Rainsford identifies remote, above-ground standpoints as means of access to significant scenes of human crisis and recognizes a form of emotional geometry in the sets of oppositions between real and symbolic cosmic entities, in particular the Earth and the stars. Echoing Francesca Orestano's focus on how the motif of blindness illuminates both social / moral and literary concerns in Dickens, Rainsford foregrounds Dickensian perspectival shifts as a critique of socially unmotivated scientific innovation as well as an experiment in representational choices. Indeed, as early as *The Lamplighter*, Rainsford suggests, one can trace remarkably stylized forms of tension between realistic and imaginative options. This seems to evidence Dickens's quest for simultaneous expression of different aspects of the same thing: stars and lamps, for example, both as real objects and as symbols of illumination or enlightenment.
- 12 While Dominic Rainsford adopts a cosmic perspective to rediscover Dickens, Gillian Piggott displaces Dickens's work in time and space to consider its reception by present-day Tripoli university students. In this article, Dickens's work undergoes what Regenia

Gagnier calls a “transculturation” or even a “reaccentuation” in a global context. Paradoxically, Piggott notices that while Dickens’s novels may seem too sentimental to British students today, Lebanese students responded readily to Dickensian melodrama and sentimentality. In this respect, their reception of Dickens’s work was surprisingly closer to that of Victorian readers. Piggott’s article goes even further in using reframing devices to broaden our prospects on Dickens’s work, in that it revisits Tripoli today “through the lens of Dickens’s urban sensibility”. In the wake of Walter Benjamin’s theories, Piggott assumes that “real or imagined cities throw light upon one another reflexively”. She nonetheless aptly wonders whether “one can learn anything about life in an Arab city like Tripoli, through an engagement with Dickens’s fictional London wanderings – or [if] this is a purely Orientalist activity.” At any rate, reading Dickens in post-Civil War Lebanon enables Gillian Piggott to reexamine the political dimension of his writing and to foreground it in a new way.

- 13 Juliet John’s analysis of Dickens’s anxiousness to reach cultural sustainability, which closes this section of the volume, overlaps with both Dominic Rainsford’s and Gillian Piggott’s essays in that she interrogates modes of approach of the temporal / atemporal and the spatial / despatialized to come to terms with Dickens’s self-awareness as an artist. Like a number of contributors to the present survey of Dickensian prospects, John starts from the oblique and the symbolic to offer fresh insights into Dickens’s practice as a self-conscious writer. For instance, we find him using natural metaphors to ponder issues of legacy and, as John correctly recalls, famously referring to his target audience as “the ocean of humanity” in an 1853 letter to W. C. Macready.
- 14 An immediate consequence of this urge to produce art which travels across time and space is found in the intertwining of social and moral concerns noted elsewhere in the volume. As John shows, the travelogue which most conspicuously focuses on a country anchored in its own past and reluctant to welcome a more socially-minded modernity, *Pictures from Italy* (1846), evidences particularly well this anxiousness to overcome the paradoxical use of past ways of being in a narrative otherwise designed as progressive, socially useful and, as a result, enduring art.
- 15 After Chialant, John also interrogates Dickensian non-realistic artistic procedures – his unique deployment of replication and hybridity, his lavish use of repetition, in particular – with a view to accounting for the diffuse but forceful, pre-postmodernist, sense of place that the reader of *Pictures from Italy* is ultimately left with.
- 16 In the last analysis, then, *Dickensian Prospects* elaborates a strikingly coherent portrait of Dickens and sheds fascinating light on his original use of focus, vantage points and frames that transform the appearance of viewed objects. Another major concern with all the contributors to the collection, it seems, is to meditate on the perennial appeal of Dickens’s fiction, a mere three to four years after the last of the celebrations commemorating the bicentenary of his death was over. Magic still operates, is the contributors’ unanimous conclusion, and a clue to this is possibly found in the unique, utterly convincing specificity of the locations which the Dickens Word has forever colonized, as Malcolm Andrews argues in his crisp, insightful afterword. What the Dickens Fellowship came to call “The Real Dickensland” – such is the last, and perhaps most fascinating of challenges with which Andrews strives to come to terms. What is it that grants the imaginary a superior form of reality, Andrews asks. Corroborating several contributors’ observations, he finds a number of clues on Dickens’s page-turning intensity in the fluid nature of his artistic practice itself, which aims at making place

palpable to the senses, even if, as Andrews points out, “he then goes on to dissolve that solidity and blur those contours in conjuring symbolic suggestiveness”.

- 17 It is perhaps this ultimate paradox that forms the most secret spring of Dickens’s timeless, mythical fiction, at the same time as it presents an interesting challenge to his readers: impelled like pilgrims to visit those memorable places that Dickens transfigured in his fiction, we are nonetheless subjected both to the shock caused by the encounter with the solid reality of Dickens’s fictional scenes and to the dissolving effect these real places have on the imagination. Even natural places such as the very quiet churchyard at Cooling, transmogrified in *Great Expectations*, disturb the mental image we had formed of the place while still keeping the constraints on us of an already processed landscape. The impression that acid has been poured onto our imagination calls to mind Virginia Woolf’s most intriguing short story, “The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection”, which dwells on the difficulty of avoiding the looking glass’s way of reflecting reality, both arranging the scene as in a still life and eating like acid into the flesh of the main character. Only fleetingly does the narrator, herself unseen, appear to be able to watch and preserve the delicate signs of life pirouetting around the room in which she sits. But then, this weaving in and out of reality, this going through the looking-glass, is something that Dickens managed superbly well in his fiction, although at some cost to his life, which certainly does not lessen the tensional interest we have in him and in his work.

AUTHORS

MARIE-AMÉLIE COSTE

Lycée Jules Ferry

Marie-Amélie Coste is Senior Lecturer in Classes Préparatoires aux Grandes Écoles, notably preparing students for the entrance exams to Écoles Normales Supérieures. She holds a PhD, entitled « Being and Appearing in Charles Dickens’s Novels », from the University of Paris-Sorbonne. She has published several articles on Dickens, including “Wearing and Disfiguring in Charles Dickens’s Novels” (*Cahiers Victoriens et Édouardiens*, 2006), “Eugene Wrayburn or the Unbearable Lightness of Being in Dickens” (*Dickensian*, 2010), “Literal-minded British and Stereotypical Foreigners in Dickens: the Limits of National Identity and the Definition of the Personal” (*Dickens and Italy*, 2010). She has co-edited special issues entitled *Dickens Matters* and *Dickens His/story* for the *Dickens Quarterly* (2011); *Dickens in the New Millennium* for *Les Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* (2012); *Dickensian Landscapes* for the journal *Représentations* (2016).
marie-amelie.coste@hotmail.com

CHRISTINE HUGUET

Université de Lille, CECILLE EA 4074

Christine Huguet is Senior Lecturer at the University of Lille, France. She has published a range of essays on Victorian fiction, translated Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* for *Le Livre de Poche (Un chant de Noël)*, and edited *Spellbound*, *George Gissing* as well as *Writing Otherness: The Pathways of George Gissing’s Imagination* (*Equilibris*, 2008 and 2011). She is co-editor of special issues for the

Dickens Quarterly and *Les Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*; *George Moore: Across Borders* (Rodopi, 2013); *George Gissing and the Woman Question* (Ashgate, 2013); *Dickens, Modernism, Modernity* (Paris: Sagittaire, 2014); and an issue on Dickensian Prospects for the journal *E-rea*. In 2011 she curated a Dickens exhibition at the Château d'Hardelot at Condette and edited its catalogue, *Charles Dickens L'Inimitable/ The Inimitable* (Paris: Democratic).
christine.huguet-meriaux@univ-lille3.fr

NATHALIE VANFASSE

Aix-Marseille Université, LERMA EA 853

Nathalie Vanfasse is Professor of English at the University of Aix-Marseille, France. She has written a monograph entitled *Dickens entre normes et déviance* (Publications universitaires de Provence, 2007) and she is the author of articles and chapters on Dickens's work and on nineteenth-century travel writing. She has co-edited special issues on *Dickens Matters* and *Dickens His/story* for the *Dickens Quarterly* (2011); *Dickens in the New Millennium* for *Les Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* (2012). She has also co-edited two volumes on *Charles Dickens, Modernism, Modernity: colloque de Cerisy* (Éditions du Sagittaire, 2014).
nathalie.vanfasse@univ-amu.fr